

Those Whom the Snow Takes

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Those Whom the Snow Takes

by [CalicoCat](#)

Summary

Even steel can freeze, and the embrace of winter almost claimed Satsuki Kiryuin, years ago.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Late December. Clear blue skies in Tokyo, bright azure, cloudless, warm and still. In the north though, Sapporo streets were foot-deep in snow, sharp white ramparts piled-up at the roadsides where the ploughs had passed. Out in the countryside, the tracks that coursed the mountains were pristine and impassable by car.

You could follow the road on foot if you wished, tracing two pairs of footprints, neat dimples in the snow, from a practical 4x4 parked where the snow became too deep to traverse. At a brisk pace it wouldn't take long to catch the two young women walking towards the summit: one striding purposefully, the other reluctantly but still somehow effortlessly, through the snow.

"Why we up 'ere again?"

Satsuki Kiryuin paused for a moment and looked back at her sister.

"You have somewhere else you need to be?"

A shrug, hands remaining buried deep in pockets, head half-submerged in a crimson scarf. A muffled response:

"Wanted to get to the vocaloid shop in Sapporo before we go."

Eyebrows raised, noticeable even at a distance.

"I didn't think that was your style."

"Ain't really. But Short-arse can't stand 'em: '*Nani sore!* Songs should be sung by people!'" Ryuko Matoi managed an evil, conspiratorial laugh. "I'm gonna get her a *dakimakura*."

"Somehow I think that unlikely to be an official item of merchandise."

"No? Sure I can find somethin' suitably filthy in a back-street shop."

Satsuki stopped at the roadside, and ran gloved fingers over the metal railings that separated the road from the steep drop down the mountainside.

"They've reinforced the barriers here. Good." The words were whispered and lost on the winds: seemingly addressed to no one but herself.

Ryuko stamped impatiently. It was biting cold, and as far as she was concerned, the countryside was best appreciated from a motorbike, preferably at 160 kph.

"So. Why're we..."

Gentle gusts spiraled snow from the dark branches of the trees that dotted the mountainside. Flakes lightly dusted Satsuki's hair and then vanished.

"This is where my road almost came to an end, once." She looked down into the valley far below them.

"What? Yer kiddin', right?"

"No. Not at all. What man – and indeed woman –" Satsuki managed a thin, hard smile at Ryuko, "was insufficient to, the embrace of nature proved more than capable of."

She closed her eyes, recalling long-neglected memories.

"We were here, Mother and I – business, I suppose, the details escape me now – the winter before you and I first became... reacquainted." She looked back down the road, at two sets of footprints still visible in the snow. "I had borrowed a car, somewhat ill-advisedly for someone not strictly in possession of a license, and driven out into the countryside, out onto this road."

"And she let you?"

Satsuki nodded slightly.

"Mother always deferred to Nietzsche in such matters."

"'Nisha'?" Following Satsuki's casual references to philosophy and history tended to make Ryuko's head ache.

"*Nietzsche*. 'Man and Superman' and so forth. I'm sure you're aware of his work."

"Huh. Sure. Didn't think the old witch was one for comics but..."

Satsuki paused, opened her mouth to say something, and then thought better of it.

"I was thinking more of 'What does not kill me, makes me stronger.'"

Ryuko nodded knowledgeably.

"Right-o. So 'Dragonball' then."

That raised a genuine smile, though Ryuko couldn't see it; it was a surprisingly good analogy.

"Well, whatever else you might say of her; Mother was always very well read."

She could see the road again, in her mind's eye. It had been clear, at least clearer than it was today, easy to negotiate; when the car had begun to judder Satsuki had first assumed that she had simply chosen the wrong gear. It had taken a moment before she had realized the mountain was shaking.

"I had reached the point we are now when the earthquake started."

Ryuko's eyes widened.

"And the road collapsed into the valley?" There were substantial concrete buttresses above and below the road; it seemed well engineered, but even so...

"No. It was nothing significant. This far from the epicenter, little more than a magnitude five." Satsuki looked up the slope, at the dark lines of the bare trees like grasping fingers amidst the snow. "But the subsequent avalanche swept the car off the road and down there."

Ryuko looked down, over the barriers. The slope wasn't steep, but it was a long way down, with little to slow a descent. A few broken-off trunks of younger saplings hinted that something heavy had once cut a haphazard path down the mountain.

"How did you...?" They'd come a long way on the country road, and Ryuko couldn't remember the last house they'd passed.

"I saw..."

What had she seen?

White. There was suffocating white all around her.

Satsuki brushed her arm across her face, expecting it to sweep aside ice crystals, and instead it deformed the puffy balloon where the airbag had deployed. She turned her head painfully, slowly, to the right; through the broken driver's side window she could see blue skies beginning to turn white-grey as the afternoon turned to evening. The car had come to rest on its side, more than half-submerged in the snow that had driven it off the road, but her door, deformed though it was, still moved when she released the lock: a single, fragile thread of luck in the circumstances.

Her head and neck were aching. For the moment there was a little warmth in the cab, but the engine wouldn't start and her winter jacket, something that would have been sufficient for intensive exploration of a frozen wilderness, was neatly folded in the trunk and now buried in the drift. A few minutes of grimacing, ungainly contortions and she'd released her seatbelt and managed to clamber out onto the exposed side of the car, like a shipwrecked sailor resting on a bobbing raft. Everything in working order then, all fingers and toes, just an aching shoulder where the seatbelt had caught her and perhaps some whiplash. Bruised, but nothing broken, but that wasn't the problem. The light was beginning to fade and the moon was already bright in the cloudless skies. Once night fell the temperature would drop dangerously low and unless she could find something to block the car's broken windows it would soon become little more than a frozen coffin. The conglomerate's limousine, custom-made in Germany to her mother's specifications, had armored glass and a satellite phone, and would probably have made a luxurious little hotel until a rescue party reached her, but the conservative rental car she'd insisted on – defying her mother's suggestion that she take something more ostentatious – didn't even have GPS. She sighed and checked her phone.

No signal. Battery 20%.

She'd have to conserve what charge she had left for when – for if – she could make a call. A quick check of the little compass in her watch, and she stumbled off down the valley, wading through the thick snow. There was a service station near to where she'd turned off the highway. With a little luck she'd reach it before she froze to death.

"Are you dead?"

Her limbs had become heavy as lead, heavier still, cold anchors dragging her down into the drifts. In the moonlight the snow and bare trees had gone on, seemingly forever: a featureless expanse of white punctuated by slim tombstones. With each step her legs had sunk into the snow almost up to her hips and finally she'd stumbled, fallen and lain still. The numbing cold had given way to a surprising – if not warmth, exactly – then lack of feeling that was somehow relaxing. She'd resolved to rest a little, close her eyes for a moment only and regain her strength, and then the unexpected voice had pierced her lethargy.

A young woman was leaning over Satsuki, face partially obscured by skiing goggles and a white muffler decorated with snowflakes. She waited for a response, and then, apparently irritated by the frosty silence, reached down purposefully and pulled Satsuki to her feet with surprising ease. The stinging cold returned, sharpening Satsuki's attention for a moment. She could see her companion more clearly now: a performance sports jacket, a jauntily decorated helmet, and what – even in the moonlight – appeared to be lengths of ridiculously-colored hair spilling out on either side. The woman was clearly one of the extreme sports enthusiasts Satsuki had occasionally read about; little wonder she was stronger than she appeared.

"My car came off the road in the avalanche..." Satsuki began.

"Really? I came down with the avalanche too. What a rush!" The woman looked up the slope with satisfaction and an almost childish chuckle.

"I'm Yuki, by the way. *Hajimemashite.*"

Satsuki took in the frozen landscape.

"Yuki... 'Snow'... That must be a popular name around here..."

Yuki gave her an unfathomable look for a moment, and then continued.

"'Yuki' is my family name. My given name... well, that would be for the future. We don't know each other that well." The chuckle again. "For now."

"And I am called Kiryuin. Satsuki Kiryuin. *Yoroshiku onegaishimasu.*" She felt her joints creak in the cold like arctic floes before an icebreaker, but Satsuki still managed a semblance of a bow.

Yuki tilted her head lightly to the side, and then ran a gloved hand through her hair, down to her waist.

“‘Kiryuin’ – that’s a Kanto name, isn’t it? You’re a long way from home, Lady Satsuki.” Yuki seemed to scrutinize Satsuki, her earlier cheerfulness giving way to curiosity, or something more serious. “So, what is it, then, that you seek in the snow?”

Yuki began to walk effortlessly through the drifts and down the valley, and Satsuki struggled to follow her.

“I must get back...”

Yuki stopped for a moment, and appeared to slump a little.

“Then follow me, Lady Satsuki.” She began to walk again, more slowly. “Perhaps a story will keep your mind from the cold.”

“A story...?”

“We country folk have whole volumes of folk stories.” Yuki stopped beside a tree for a moment and gently shook a branch, allowing a crystalline blanket of white to cover her helmet and shoulders. “Do you know the tales of the *yuki onna* – the woman of the snow?”

Thoughts of the endless shelves and weathered leather covers in the distant library were momentarily warming. Satsuki exhaled shakily, and the little cloud rolled and turned like steam above a cup of bitter tea.

“Some of them...”

The branches continued to move in the rising wind as she began to walk again, but Yuki’s voice was clear in the freezing air: crystalline, bell-like.

“Many years ago, during the rule of the shogun, a noblewoman was travelling these roads with her retainers.

“Perhaps she was guilty of some crime, or perhaps she’d forgotten to make an offering at the local temple before she departed, or perhaps chance was simply against her that day, but here, on this very mountain, the winter gods crashed an avalanche upon her and swept her palanquin into the valley.

“She awoke to cold wind on her cheeks, and when she opened her eyes she saw the *yuki onna* close to her. The spirit’s cold embrace had already claimed those few servants who had escaped the crushing weight of the snow, and now the noblewoman was alone.

“She was alone, but unafraid, the daughter of a family renowned in warfare and dominion. And the face in freezing white before her was the most beautiful she had seen in her short life: delicate as snowflakes, and hard as a glacier.

“In turn the *yuki onna* took pity on her, entranced by the surging of her blood and the defiant warmth of her cheeks. She led the noblewoman to safety at the end of the valley, but before

they parted she made her swear an oath: ‘Tell no one what you have seen here – neither the living, nor the dead – or I will stop your heart and freeze your blood within your veins.’”

Satsuki stumbled, but found the strength to push herself to her feet once again.

“I know this story... It’s akin to the chapter in Kobayashi’s ‘Kwaidan’ ...”

Yuki stopped, and although Satsuki couldn’t see her face, she sensed a melancholy smile.

“That’s a good story, but it’s not how this tale ends.

“The noblewoman returned to her life of wealth and privilege. But wealth did not always mean good fortune in those days: she had little freedom, and was soon betrothed to a man twenty years her senior. And at night she thought of the face in the snow: the cold breath that brought goosebumps to her skin, frozen fingertips that she longed to warm in her mouth, the long hair dusted with ice crystals.

“In time it became unbearable. In time she went to the family cemetery and whispered the secret of her deliverance on the snowy Hokkaido slopes at her father’s grave. Then she travelled north, and escaping the attention of her handmaidens and bodyguards, walked alone into the winter forests.

“There the *yuki onna* found her. ‘Why did you break the oath?’ she roared in the blizzards. And the noblewoman called out in reply, ‘The oath was not forgotten; but my memories of you melt like ice each time the spring thaw comes, and run into the streams of my past. Each winter they are a little less. In time, there will only be a single snowflake to remind me of you.’ In the creaking of the ice on the frozen rivers the *yuki onna* called back to her: ‘What is it, then, that you seek in the snow?’”

Yuki turned, blue eyes scintillating in the moonlight.

“And the noblewoman replied, ‘If you will it, freeze the sight of you in my eyes and let my heart stop on your lips.’”

Satsuki’s limbs were becoming leaden again, she staggered, and had to grab onto Yuki to avoid collapsing.

“And what... did the *yuki onna* do?”

There was a sudden blast of wind that shook the branches and sent snow swirling around the pair of them.

“I kissed her. And her heart stopped, and the blood froze in her veins.”

Yuki placed an arm around Satsuki’s waist, and lifted her upright. In that moment, Satsuki realized how it was that her companion travelled so easily over the deep drifts. Where Satsuki sank into the treacherous snows up to her knees, Yuki stepped lightly, each footfall an inch deep, no more. Looking back at their haphazard path through the valley, Yuki’s footprints were already invisible.

Yuki pulled her in close and Satsuki felt frost forming on her cheeks with each long, slow breath.

“Shall I kiss you, Lady Satsuki Kiryuin?” The embrace of oblivion was pulling Satsuki down.
“Shall I kiss you, and let you leave all your hardships here in the snow?”

It was becoming difficult to think, the moonlight was now only a tunnel, narrowing second-by-second as the darkness crowded around her.

“I cannot... I have... so much to do...”

Yuki brushed fingertips lightly over Satsuki’s cheek, and where they passed she felt the sharp bite of a frost burn.

“Will you not spend the rest of your life with me?”

Their lips were almost touching now.

Satsuki. I have to tell you what happened to your sister.

Numb, as she had felt then.

Lady Satsuki. There was an accident on the mountain roads. Your father...

Numb, as she felt now.

“It’s... not my life... to give...”

Yuki paused for a moment and then turned to the side, supporting Satsuki easily with one arm. She sighed a little, more with resignation than sadness, and snowflakes formed in the air around her.

“Then you need only keep walking. Look. We’re almost at the highway.”

There was something dark, like a black river, cutting through the whiteness, and beyond that warm orange of a service station’s fluorescent lights.

“I imagine keeping secrets is something of a skill of yours. So, I’ll only say that should you ever wish to leave this all behind, you need only come here and call for me. The blizzards will do the rest.”

The cold fingers brushed through Satsuki’s hair and the pain jerked her to awareness once more.

“She had long, dark hair. Just like yours.”

Satsuki turned and found herself resting on the black, bare branches of an ancient tree. The lights from the service station were dazzling, almost sunlight bright, warm and welcoming. So she surged, almost tumbled, forward, hauling herself over the snow piled-up at the

roadside, dragging limbs like she was jerking a marionette as she crossed the road and forecourt.

She made it through the doorway before she collapsed, pulling down shelves of instant ramen and a life-size figure of a local celebrity on top of herself as she fell.

“I saw...”

Keeping secrets was still a skill, and a habit, even from her sister. Perhaps it was for the best.

“I saw... the lights of the service station we passed on the highway. I made it inside before I passed out.”

“Frostbite?” Ryuko asked hesitantly. It was crazy, but now she thought about it, had she ever actually counted all Satsuki’s fingers and toes?

“A touch on one cheek.” Satsuki brought her hand up to her face. “Good gloves. Good boots. A moderate case of hypothermia, nothing more.”

“So, why’re we up here again?” Ryuko scowled a little, “Other than ya wantin’ to freak me out a bit.”

“You know the *Omiwatari* on Lake Suwa? The footsteps of Takeminakata-no-kami as he crosses the lake to visit Yasakatome-no-kami?”

“Yeah. I’ve seen ‘em. When I was a kid. Scrambled out on the ice ta get a better look, scared the hell outta Dad.”

“A goddess passes here also.”

Ryuko pulled off a glove and pressed the back of her hand to her sister’s forehead.

“OK. Yer definitely runnin’ a fever and startin’ to talk nonsense. Best I get ya back to the hotel and into a hot tub.”

Satsuki took her hand and squeezed it gently.

“I wanted to show her what I did with my life.”

Snow began to fall as they walked back towards the car: a light dusting, festive and unthreatening. Ryuko was surprised to see Satsuki stick her tongue out, and even more surprised at the blush when her sister caught a snowflake, almost as though she’d stolen a kiss. It made her inexplicably jealous, even more so when she couldn’t catch one of her own.

*Nights without you
With the white snowfall
Pile high; should it be so,
I, too, with the drifts,
Shall melt away, I fear.*

- Kakinomoto no Hitomaro

End Notes

[Omiwatari](#) is a pattern of ice that sometimes forms on the surface of Lake Suwa

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